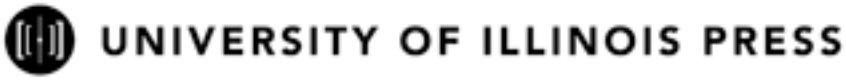

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Review Essay

EDWARD J. BLUM

Kenneth L. Deutsch and Joseph R. Fornieri, editors. *Lincoln's American Dream: Clashing Political Perspectives*. Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, Inc., 2005. Pp. xii, 500.

From the moment Abraham Lincoln hit the national stage during his debates with Stephen A. Douglas in 1858, Americans have been fascinated with him. He was the "black Republican" who would supposedly end slavery, making secession the only choice for slaveholding states. He was an inspiration for freedom whose Emancipation Proclamation and Gettysburg Address refocused the Union war effort. In death, he became a northern martyr and Christlike figure. Herman Melville sanctified him as "the Forgiver," while an African American in South Carolina declared, "Lincoln died for we, Christ died for we, and me believe him de same mans." Throughout the late-nineteenth century and the twentieth, Lincoln was cast and recast: a despised demagogue, a master political thinker, a bumbling fool, a rational white supremacist, a skeptical infidel, a loving father, a hateful husband, and, most recently, America's first "gay president."[1]

The enduring influence of Lincoln and the infinite myths surrounding him attest to the public's continuing fascination with him. But all of the visions and revisions may lead some scholars to wonder if there can ever be anything "new under the sun" in the land of Lincoln. For those searching for new ideas about Lincoln, the edited compilation by political scientists Kenneth L. Deutsch and Joseph R. Fornieri offers very little. While the essays they brought together offer a wide-ranging approach to Lincoln's political life, they do little to advance Lincoln scholarship in any substantive way.

Deutsch and Fornieri have arranged thirty-two previously published essays into eight sections. Each section focuses on the meanings, developments, and destinies of American government and how

1. Edward J. Blum, *Reforging the White Republic: Race, Religion, and American Nationalism, 1865–1898* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 20–23; Merrill D. Peterson, *Lincoln in the American Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Jean H. Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln: A Biography* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989); and C. A. Tripp, *The Intimate World of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: The Free Press, 2005).

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they relate to Lincoln. In the first section, James G. Randall, Willmoore Kendall, Harry Jaffa, and M. E. Bradford alternatively describe Lincoln as a "conservative" and a "liberal," as one who either destroyed or preserved the founders' intentions for the United States. None of the authors, though, truly answers the fundamental contradiction in Lincoln's approach to the Declaration of Independence: that he claimed to uphold a brief for revolution while using all of his political and military power to put one down. Lincoln's political ambition is the subject of the second section. Richard N. Current, Richard Curry, Bradford, and Mark Neely battle against the idea that Lincoln's political ambition stemmed from a psychological commitment to killing the founding fathers (symbolically, of course) and thereby providing room for himself and others of his generation as "great men." Turning to issues of race and slavery, section three highlights the works of Don Fehrenbacher, Jason Silverman, Lucas Morel, and Stephen Oates. Lincoln comes across not as a principled opponent of slavery but a politician more interested in pragmatic change than racial equality. Conspicuous by its absence is a selection from Lerone Bennett's work, although Deutsch and Fornieri include a review of *Forced into Glory*. In that provocative work, Bennett boldly claims that Lincoln was nothing less than a white supremacist who envisioned an all-white America. It would have been nice to see Bennett's own words, rather than an assault on them. The fourth section focuses upon Lincoln's approach to political leadership. T. Harry Williams, Ethan Fishman, Ralph Learner, Oates, Colleen Shogan, and Robert Rafferty debate whether Lincoln was led by utopian vision, pragmatic politicking, or prudent thoughtfulness.

The final four sections concentrate on Lincoln's use and approach to executive power, his connections between religion and politics, his approach to the role of the state, and what his political positions offer for contemporary issues. Randall, Herman Belz, Jeffrey Crouch, Mark J. Rozell, and Phillip Henderson wonder whether Lincoln ruled with dictatorial authority or within the confines of the Constitution. William Lee Miller, Michael Zuckert, Bruce Frohnen, and Reinhold Niebuhr engage Lincoln's religious approach to American democracy and society. While they debate the merits and drawbacks to civil religion (the imbuement of the state or nation with sacred concepts, ideas, and emotions), all agree that Lincoln had a powerful religious personality. In the section on Lincoln's use of the state, Frank Williams and William Pederson, Thomas J. DiLorenzo, Rogan Kersh, and George Anastaplo describe Lincoln as a great centralizer, one who harnessed the power of the federal government to make social change for good or for ill.

The final section, "Lincoln for Our Time," provides two essays on how Lincoln's political vision speaks to contemporary problems. Particularly, Current maintains that Lincoln offered an image of Americans as a unified people committed to similar political principles. Notions of multiculturalism or cultural pluralism would have been nonsensical to Lincoln. George McKenna then conjectures a "Lincolnian position" on abortion. Claiming that both "liberal" and "conservative" stances on abortion can be gleaned from Lincoln's political principles, McKenna proceeds to suggest that contemporary politicians can develop a pro-life position from Lincoln's views. A Lincolnian view, McKenna argues, would tolerate abortion, since it has been endorsed by Congress and the Supreme Court, but would also aim to restrict and discourage the practice of abortion. Whatever the "liberal" stance on abortion that could stem from Lincoln's principles is completely ignored. The compilation concludes with an afterword from Allen C. Guelzo, perhaps only rivaled by Doris Kearns Goodwin as the most prominent current Lincoln scholar.

Overall, the collection presents a conservative view of Lincoln. His approach to slavery can serve as a basis to oppose abortion; Lincoln would have opposed multiculturalism; Lincoln was a proponent of big government, albeit an activist one; and Lincoln favored intimate connections between religion and politics in the form of a unified civil religion. Lincoln seems, in short, more the father of modern Republicanism than of the modern Democratic Party. Yet, if readers will forgive a dose of ahistorical presentism, it seems evident to me that the contemporary Republican Party would confuse and enrage Lincoln. What he seemed to hate most in slaveholders and Democrats was their logical inconsistencies and double-talk, their inability to stick to any principle or rationale. Throughout the course of the Civil War, Lincoln indeed shifted the moral emphasis on several occasions, as Harry Stout has recently shown, but he never shifted his central justification: the restoration of the Union.[2] Contemporary wars with ever-shifting explanations, I would think, would baffle him.

Perhaps most striking about this compilation is what the editors left out. There is no discussion of how Lincoln's personal life may have influenced his political experiences and trajectory. It is quite possible that Lincoln's wife Mary Todd, and her astounding political ambition, played a pivotal role in Lincoln's political career. Or, more controversially, it is possible that Lincoln's sexual unorthodoxy (whether his alleged sexual encounters with men or the loveless elements of his

2. Harry S. Stout, *Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the Civil War* (New York: Viking, 2006).

marriage) may have affected his social and political vision. One wonders where the Lincoln of dirty jokes and Aesop's fables fits into the presentation in this volume. While the compilation should be shorter, one could easily imagine cutting several of the older essays to make room for issues of family life, gender, and sexuality.

The lack of originality in this compilation becomes even more frustrating when viewed in the light of the fantastic work Fornieri previously has published on Lincoln. Fornieri's *Abraham Lincoln's Political Faith* is a superb book. Examining the private, personal, and public faiths of Lincoln, Fornieri demonstrated how Lincoln internalized and propagated a biblical republicanism as the basis for his political and social views. *The Political Faith of Abraham Lincoln* reveals Lincoln as a political theologian able to meet and defeat proslavery forces on their own intellectual turf. Sadly, *Lincoln's American Dream* lacks the originality and the creativity of Fornieri's own work.[3]

One wonders for whom this compilation is intended. Since there are no original essays, and since many of them are decades old, Lincoln scholars will find nothing new in the work. Most of the heated discussions are one sided—with the voices of Bennett or Tripp silenced. *Lincoln's American Dream* feels too long and is too overpriced for use with undergraduates, even for students in Civil War classes or American political theory. If a teacher or scholar were interested in any one of the specific essays, she or he could find them in their original form. Moreover, the construction of the book is frustrating. Notes come at the end of chapters, rather than at the bottom of the page or at the end of the book, so they are extremely difficult to locate. Some of the authors and original essay locations are identified on the first page of the article, while others are relegated to the endnotes. While certainly not a nightmare, *Lincoln's American Dream* is anything but a dream.

3. Joseph R. Fornieri, *Abraham Lincoln's Political Faith* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2005).